

## *The Eagle Tribune*

# Romney pares legal-aid dollars

By Meredith Warren

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BOSTON -- Local lawmakers vow to stop Gov. Mitt Romney's plan to drain a pool of money dedicated to helping the poor get civil legal assistance.

"It's atrocious. People that need it the most won't have access to the legal system," said state Rep. Michael A. Costello, D-Newburyport. "This is something we'll most likely override."

Before signing off on a \$22.1 billion state budget Monday, Romney issued \$201 million in vetoes -- including a \$7.6 million cut from the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, effectively zeroing out the state's contribution toward free legal services for low-income residents.

Romney's chief legal counsel Daniel Winslow said the cut is necessary because the Legislature refused to adopt many of the governor's money-saving government reforms. But lawmakers and those who deliver free legal services say the cut is shortsighted and will exacerbate the state's social problems.

There are 84,000 people in Essex County who qualify for free legal aid, which means they have incomes below 125 percent of the poverty line, said Ross Dolloff, executive director of Neighborhood Legal Services.

Dolloff's agency -- which has offices in Lawrence, Lynn and Salem -- currently represents about 1,800 clients with civil legal problems, including issues with family law, housing and disability benefits.

If Romney's plan to eliminate the state's civil legal aid fund is successful, Dolloff said he will lose one-third of his funding, forcing him to drop 700 to 800 clients, cut one-third of his staff and possibly close one of his offices.

In the end, if the money is cut, Dolloff said the state will end up spending more to house those evicted residents in state shelters.

Ken MacIver, executive director of Merrimack Valley Legal Services, said Romney's cut would essentially eliminate his agency's services for the disabled and victims of domestic violence, and force him to fire five of the 16 lawyers on his staff.

Romney's \$7.6 million veto eliminates \$2.5 million in funding for the Battered Women's Legal Assistance Project, \$544,000 for the Medicare Advocacy Project and \$1.2 million for the Disability Benefits Project.

MacIver, who has offices in Lowell and Lawrence, said the governor's veto would equal a \$450,000 cut in his \$1.8 million budget.

MacIver said many Lawrence residents have a "desperate need" for legal services. "In terms of victims of domestic violence, they would have less ability to get support for their families, they would be less safe because they won't have access to protective services, and more trouble getting custody of their children," MacIver said.

Winslow said the state simply cannot afford to continue paying for free legal aid, since lawmakers rebuffed many of the governor's plans for reform. He pointed to Romney's plan to merge the Massachusetts Highway Department and the Turnpike Authority -- a move he said would save \$190 million.

"This was a difficult choice among many difficult choices the governor had to make because of lack of reform in the budget," Winslow said. "This is the price tag of business as usual."

Winslow said the agencies offering free legal services could charge their clients fees to make up for the lost money. He also said low-income clients have the option to defend themselves in court without a lawyer, and said domestic violence victims can appear in court with taxpayer-funded victim witness advocates.

But lawmakers like state Rep. Barbara L'Italien, D-Andover, said they will fight to save the civil legal aid money when they consider Romney's vetoes next week.